

“The Audacity of Experiencing God”

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A Sermon for Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

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I worship for many reasons. Yes, it's my job. Much more important, though, worship is how God fills me for the week ahead. God uses worship to turn me around and straighten me up, to shape me to walk God's ways. God uses worship to connect us together, because to follow Jesus, we need each other.

Most important, I worship to give myself to God. And with the hope that maybe, just maybe, we will have an experience of God. We can't make that happen. God is in charge. I'm fine with that. Still, we can make ourselves ready and open. We can be expectant of an experience of God.

I know. It's silly. Of course it's silly, if God is not real. . . . But it's even sillier if God is real! Presuming we can encounter God . . . and want it! . . . that's chutzpah! It's audacious!

Listen to this.

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. They shouted to each other, saying:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of heavenly forces!

All the earth is filled with God's glory!”

The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke.

I said, *“Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the Lord of heavenly forces!”* Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth and said, *“See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed.”*

Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, *“Whom should I send, and who will go for us?”* I said, *“I'm here; send me.”*

Isaiah 6:1-8

The Common English Bible

II

That's about 750 years before Jesus. The prophet Isaiah has a visionary encounter with God Almighty. The whole thing blows apart our imaginations. The Temple of God. Six-

winged creatures that use two of them to fly around, and the other four as veils. Their booming voices calling back and forth, shaking the building while it fills with smoke.

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of heavenly forces!
All the earth is filled with God’s glory!”*

Well, no, it isn’t. All the earth is not filled with God’s glory! Not like this! God’s glory, the fullness of God’s presence, an unfiltered experience of God, God’s entirety . . . we don’t know what that’s like. That okay! See what happens when Isaiah sees just a bit of God’s glory? He is wiped out.

*“Doom! It’s Doomsday!
I’m as good as dead! . . .
Here I’ve looked God in the face!”¹*

It’s like Isaiah is trembling and sobbing out his own obituary. He has experienced God, and knows he has no chance.

III

Imagine the audacity of thinking we can encounter God! Suppose “god” was behold-able, suppose “god” was within our grasping, suppose we could know “god” . . . would this “god” be God at all?

We are embodied. We are finite. We are creatures. Time limits us to this moment. Space confines us to this place. Our knowledge, our understanding is held to whatever we can collectively squish into these things called brains. The Internet? Sorry Facebook and Google, but within the vast reaches of the cosmos, your web is what a spider clings to before the wind blows it away.

God is not simply “more” than us. God is entirely “Other” than anything we can know.

Our best words cannot adequately describe the aroma of a cup of coffee.² We hope to comprehend God?

Saint Augustine, who thought a lot about God, said, *“If you can understand it, it’s not God.”*³

¹ Isaiah 6:5, *The Message*.

² As was pointed out by Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the 20th century’s great philosophers of linguistics. Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 49.

³ Quoted in McGrath, 111.

Go to Hawaii. (How's that for homework!) Dip a bucket into the Pacific ocean. Fill it up. Hold it high. Has the ocean noticed? Has the loss of your bucketful made any difference to it? Do you look at your bucketful and say, "I've got the whole ocean here?" How can we imagine we can "get" God?⁴

One of our United Church's doctrinal statements starts with this: "*God is Holy Mystery.*"⁵ The Mystery not even Sherlock Holmes would be arrogant enough to try to solve.

We have such a hard time "getting" each other. God?

Ah, but we can *know* each other. I can know you, as you show yourself to me. We can *know* God, because God wants to be known by us.

Your pitifully small, leaky bucket can't hold the ocean. But it still holds water. Real ocean water.

And yes, God is Holy Mystery. Not to be solved. Rather, the Mystery Who invites us to explore. God the Mystery, Who delights in our discovery. In science the more we discover and understand, the more we discover how much we don't understand. That's the wondrous joy. How much more with God.

IV

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's for us Christians to pay particular attention to this peculiar way we understand God.

Basically, here's what the teaching about the Trinity says:

- God is singular. There is only one God.
- God is plural: in Jesus' words, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God.
- God is a diversity. The Father, Son and Spirit are distinct from each other.
- God is love. The Father, Son and Spirit are bound in intimate relationship together.
- And, remember, God is one, and only one.

The Bible does not teach the Trinity. What the discovery of the Trinity did is hold together all that the Bible teaches about God.⁶ Through generations of sifting and struggling, exploring and mapping this biblical terrain of God, Jesus, the Spirit, Christians realized that

⁴ Ibid, 46.

⁵ "A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada" (2006).

⁶ McGrath writes, "[Trinity] is a way – in fact, really the only way – of making sense of the biblical witness to God" McGrath, 117.

God is Trinity.⁷

I don't grasp this. I have taken a graduate seminar on the Trinity. I have read profound books about the Trinity. Christian theology these days is exploding in thinking about the Trinity. I'm sure none of these great thinkers would say they grasp the Trinity. We don't get God!

Eugene Peterson writes that the Trinity *"prevents us from reducing God to what we can understand or need. . . . Trinity keeps pulling us into a far larger world than we can imagine on our own."*⁸

Here is another Bible reading. It is a long way from Isaiah's vision. Yet, it is so much like it.

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Galilee when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, *"Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch."* Simon replied, *"Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets."*

So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink.

When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, *"Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!"* . . . Jesus said to Simon, *"Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people."* As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Luke 5:1-11
The Common English Bible

⁷ I got the image of the map from Eugene Peterson, [Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 7-8.

⁸ *Ibid*, 46.

V

That's no vision. It's the squish of lakeside mud, the overhead squeal of gulls, and the smells of the fishing industry. It's not Isaiah in the Temple. It's small-business folks cleaning up after an unprofitable shift. It's no crazy-looking angel, nor the Lord Almighty blinding us from the throne of the cosmos. It's a dark-skinned, bushy-bearded, rough-handed guy who borrows a boat for a speaking spot . . . Jesus, God the Son.

But the effect is the same. Peter crumples down and begs for mercy. He has seen the Unseeable, shared his boat with the Infinite, lent a hand to the Almighty.

You can experience God, because the Trinity wants to be present to you. God the Son squeezed down into time and place, absolute vulnerability and ultimate weakness (betrayed to death on a cross!). All to be present and knowable to you. To love you, and so to be loved by you. Yes, all of us. Including you.

God the Spirit brings the Divine presence into those ordinary cracks, and ruts, and routines, and lives that are ours. Even a creaky old church on a Sunday morning. And anywhere else, for that matter.

You are too weak? Let Jesus be your strength.

Too messed up? Let Jesus be your health.

Not sure what to think? Let Jesus be your beginning.

Not enough faith? Let Jesus hold you faithfully.

Not good enough, like Isaiah or Peter? Let Jesus be your righteousness; the Burning Coal who touches you and makes you clean; the strong Hand, soon to be nail-pierced, who lifts you from your sinner's knees and says, "Don't be afraid."

God the Trinity is the Mystery you can explore, the True Reality you can experience, the Wonder you can behold.

Absolutely, this is audacious. Such is the audacity of God! Amen!